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CHICAGO (WBBM) - Top officials from Lake and McHenry Counties yesterday told an ad-hoc Suburban Transit Commission chaired by Congressmen Mark Kirk and Melissa Bean that they want to see a restructuring of the RTA Board.

WBBM's Bob Roberts has the story.

McHenry County Chairman Ken Koehler and Lake County Division of Transportation Director Martin Buehler said a restructured board that included the Metra and Pace chairmen and representatives from each county would give reverse and suburb-to-suburb commuters a bigger voice.

"The RTA as an institution is surprised to learn transit is very important for communities outside of Cook County," Koehler said.

"The current allocation of the RTA board members is not consistent with the population distribution and only one of the three service boards (CTA) is represented. Changes in the RTA board membership should be made so that surprises from the entire region would be kept to a minimum."

But Buehler also said that Metra cannot be allowed to rust into a state of advanced disrepair, and that encouraged CTA President Frank Kruesi, who watched from the audience.

"I was encouraged by the extent to which there is a message here in the collar counties that transit matters, and CTA matters," Kruesi said. "This is a much different and a much better message than I had when I was here last year, the year before, and the year before that."

Kruesi took the opportunity afterward to argue his case for increased funding with several lawmakers and local officials. Kruesi said that many Metra riders use the CTA, and that motorists who drive from the collar counties into the city will see gridlock if the CTA is forced to reduce service.

In his comments to the group, RTA Chairman Jim Reilly argued against any change that would upset the current city- suburban balance. All agreed that requiring supermajority votes to force regional consensus must continue.

Metra Chairman Phil Pagano conceded that the commuter rail agency is “not good” at accommodating reverse commuters, and blamed it in part on existing signaling systems. But he said that it would become increasingly important in the coming decade.

On the Union Pacific Northwest Line, he said, Metra intends to add half a dozen express trains each rush hour, add between seven and 10 reverse commute trains, and re-establish service on its McHenry branch for the first time since the 1980s to Johnsburg.

Pace board member Dick Welton argued that the suburban bus service today spends on service in Lake County almost exactly what it receives in revenues, \$13.5 million a year, and said it is trying to shake its image as a service that “runs a lot of big, empty buses” by more offering “demand-response,” or dial-a-ride services, van-based service and countywide paratransit services in Lake County.

The RTA last week asked all three service boards to prepare service and funding alternatives to be implemented beginning in July if no new money is forthcoming from Springfield. Metra has indicated that it will postpone \$60 million in construction and rehabilitation projects. CTA has said that it considers all options on the table, including fare hikes and service cuts. Pace has not yet decided what it would do.